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Shultz's conscience *v*

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THE trouble with George Shultz's position on lie detectors is that by denouncing the process for himself, he is in fact exempting the entire State Department. How could anyone rightly expect 4,000 employees and officials at State to submit to something the boss has ridiculed not only as a sham, but as a slander?

Both Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and Central Intelligence Director William Casey, who have volunteered to take the test, understand that point. CIA spokesman George Laudner commented last week that Casey believed "in the importance of setting an example."

Shultz has set an example of a different kind, and it is not hard to guess what will happen when the process used to pick suspects turns up its first names at State.

Shultz knew no one was going to make him take the test, but that is hardly the point. In making polygraphs a question of conscience, he has publicly encouraged those under him to defy the Reagan directive.

"As loyal FSOs (foreign service officers), we are very pleased to agree with our boss," said Gerald Lamberty, president of the American Foreign Service Association, Friday. "I hope his statement is reflected in the performance of the department."

Though Reagan has chosen to ignore it, Shultz has committed a high profile act of insubordination.

Well, bravo, George Shultz. It is rare enough in government for officials to take stands on principle that we are heartened by what you have done, particularly since we agree that subjecting foreign service officers to polygraphs is a dumb idea.

What's more, we think the administration's rationale — that polygraphs help catch spies — is disingenuous. As Shultz points out, they don't, being far more likely to implicate innocent people and miss guilty ones.

The real reason for the directive on polygraphs, which Reagan signed Nov. 1 but which became public only last week, is Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's obsession with Pentagon leaks. But there is clearly no reason to believe that what is unreliable in catching spies will be reliable in stopping leaks.

Even if we disagreed with Shultz on the question of polygraphs, we would applaud his stand on principle. This is not to say that insubordination is any way to run a government or that repeated threats to resign (a la Al Haig) increase anybody's moral stature, but in this case, with this man, it is correct.

Since in office, Shultz has been a team player. Though State's policy differences with the Pentagon are well-known, unlike Haig, Shultz has not been one to break ranks if he lost a battle. Nor did he crow if he won. Only last week was it learned that his first and only previous threat to resign, two years ago, came over this same polygraph issue. At the time, Reagan sided with him.

With Haig, some half-dozen threats to resign were little more than tactical maneuvers, which, like all tactics, can backfire. Haig's finally backfired when one of his resignations was accepted.

With Shultz, it is not tactics, but conscience. When a Cabinet member feels that strongly on an issue, it is not only his right but his duty to take his stand, take it publicly and take the consequences.